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ALL IN LED RAY'S WORK

Diminutive in scale yet large in ambition, Charles LeDray's sculptures of ordinary items are the subject of a traveling survey.

BY MATTHEW NICHOLS

ASTONISHMENT is a common reaction to the art of Charles LeDray. By scaling down the dimensions of everyday objects, the artist lures viewers close to his sculptures, where they tend to marvel over his meticulous craftsmanship. The various garments he constructs are not only very small, but also expertly finished with buttons, zippers, embroidery and appliqués. He has shaped thousands of tiny ceramic vessels on a pottery wheel before glazing and decorating each unique form. His miniature books are always bound by hand, and some contain detailed illustrations that redefine the thumbnail sketch. Audiences will no doubt be wowed by the 54 finely wrought sculptures presented in "Charles LeDray: workworkworkworkwork," a traveling exhibition that originated at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art in July and opens this month at the Whitney Museum in New York. But this midcareer survey also encourages viewers to step back and assess some of the larger themes and issues that LeDray has explored for the past 25 years.

Born in Seattle in 1960, LeDray is a mostly self-taught artist who has mastered an array of creative skills, including embroidery, carving and throwing pottery. He credits his mother with teaching him to sew at the age of four, and his expertise in that arena has been evident since the late 1980s, when he began fabricating small articles of clothing. Some of these handmade garments could fit only a

Partial view of Charles LeDray's *MENS SUITS*, 2006-09, fabric, thread, embroidery floss, Plasticine, Plexiglas and mixed mediums, one of three parts, each 50 by 90½ by 80½ inches; at the ICA Boston. Photo John Kennard. Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Charles LeDray: workworkworkworkwork," at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Nov. 18, 2010-Feb. 13, 2011.

Barbie doll, and are stitched together to form ropes, webs and other networks. Other sculptures present toddler-size outfits on wooden or wire hangers, tailors' dummies and the occasional coatrack (all of which are crafted from scratch). Though the small sizes evoke childhood, the various styles clearly belong to the world of adults, and this combination suggests that socialization is one of the artist's abiding concerns. Like clothing in general, LeDray's sartorial statements tend to be class- and gender-specific, and many convey identities that appear restrictive and ill-fitting.

Uniforms of blue-collar masculinity are presented in several works, including *Charly/Chas* (1999-2002), a 29-inch-tall dressmaker's form that displays the heavy-duty cotton apparel typically worn by mechanics. Two leather tool belts encircle the form's waist and contain little replicas of a wrench, a hammer, screwdrivers and work gloves. In the similarly scaled *World's Greatest Dad* (1993), camouflage-patterned cargo pants are paired with a black satin bomber jacket, its surface embroidered with patches that advertise Harley-Davidson motorcycles, several cigarette brands, and military service in Korea, Vietnam and the first Iraq War. Given their titles, both works seem rooted in LeDray's biography. But even without knowledge of the artist's personal history, viewers can appreciate the remarkably proficient sewing and needlework that generated these outfits, and how these traditionally feminine skills signal a certain retreat from the hyperbolic masculinities on display.

THAT THE STANDARD MEN'S SUIT is no less confining a uniform seems to be the message of numerous sculptures that subject this particular outfit to all manner of deformation and implied violence. In *Hole* (1998), for example, a diminutive wool jacket, striped shirt and paisley-patterned tie hang from a wall-mounted hook. But LeDray has cut a



View of *workworkworkworkwork*, 1991, fabric, thread and mixed mediums, 588 objects, approx. 45 feet long; installed on a sidewalk, Astor Place, New York City. Private collection, Houston. Courtesy the artist.



ragged oval through the suit's center, leaving a symbolic void. A similar ensemble is shown in *Torn Suit* (1997-98), where the lower halves of a jacket, shirt and tie have been shredded into tatters. A particularly poignant and anthropomorphic variation occurs in *Untitled (Suit with small suit cut from it)*, from 2000. As the title plainly states, LeDray neatly removed swatches of fabric from this pint-size suit in order to fashion a much smaller replica. Like a recalcitrant child dragged along by a determined parent, the second suit is attached to the larger garment's left cuff, where it hangs in relative disarray.

A more comfortable identity seems to be realized in *Man of Confusion* (1992), despite the work's title. In this casual arrangement of clothing, a wee white shirt and a slightly

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bigger pair of brown trousers are displayed on top of a yet larger wool jacket, which is spread across a low platform. The final element, a striped tie of normal dimensions, in a rainbowlike array of colors, snakes across the pile and seems to cap a progressive evolution from childhood to maturity, from propriety to flamboyance, from fitting in to acting out. The rainbow tie could also announce the missing man's homosexuality, and this interpretation gains support from other works in the show. Not far away in the Boston installation was *Pride Flag* (1996), a scaled-down variation of the enormous rainbow banners that are often marched through city streets during gay pride festivities. LeDray's rather funereal version hangs vertically against the wall, replaces the brightly colored stripes with shades of gray, and substitutes dozens of dark, doll-size garments for the gay men and women who normally carry the flag. Dangling ineffectually from the banner's edges, the empty apparel commemorates victims of the AIDS epidemic.

A certain degree of mourning also seems to motivate "Village People," an ongoing sculptural project, begun by LeDray in 1993, which now consists of four discrete but related bodies of work. At each stage of production LeDray has fashioned dozens of small hats that are meant to hang on the wall in a long horizontal line, roughly 9 feet above the floor. In Boston, the 45 hats on display (made in two installments between 2003-06 and 2006-10) included a beige fedora, a jockey's cap, a tasseled fez, a construction worker's hardhat and several baseball caps embroidered with different vocational cues (coach, security guard, DSNY). That these groupings celebrate the fluidity and multiplicity of identity is underscored by the project's title, which pays homage to the campy disco band that introduced a highly performative gay masculinity to mainstream audiences in the late 1970s. Since "village people" describes the denizens of a historically gay New York neighborhood, the unorthodox installation of these empty hats—high on the wall and just beyond the reach of a person of average height—functions as a tribute to a host of departed souls.

ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT ISSUE in LeDray's work is labor. One could argue, of course, that labor-intensive craftsmanship is a hallmark of every sculpture in this show. But certain works seem to foreground this aspect more than others, including several tiny sculptures that are carved from human bone. *Sturbridge Cobblers Bench* (2000), for example, is just over 2 inches wide, yet this colonial-style worktable features mortise-and-tenon joinery, scalloped edges and even a functioning drawer. Miniature bone furniture is also displayed in an untitled work from 1999-2000 that comprises tables, chairs, armoires and bed frames that are precariously stacked to a height of 18 inches. These osseous objects link the art of fine cabinetry to LeDray's own fastidious practice, and ghoulishly remind viewers of the manual dexterity invested in both pursuits.



Above, *Untitled (Suit with small suit cut from it)*, 2000, fabric, thread and mixed mediums, 28½ by 12 by 3 inches. Collection Robin Wright and Ian Reeves. Photo Tom Powel. Courtesy Sperone Westwater.

Left, *Man of Confusion*, 1992, fabric, thread, buttons, 18 by 37 inches. Collection Ernst A. Nijkerk, Wassenaar, The Netherlands. Photo John Kennard.



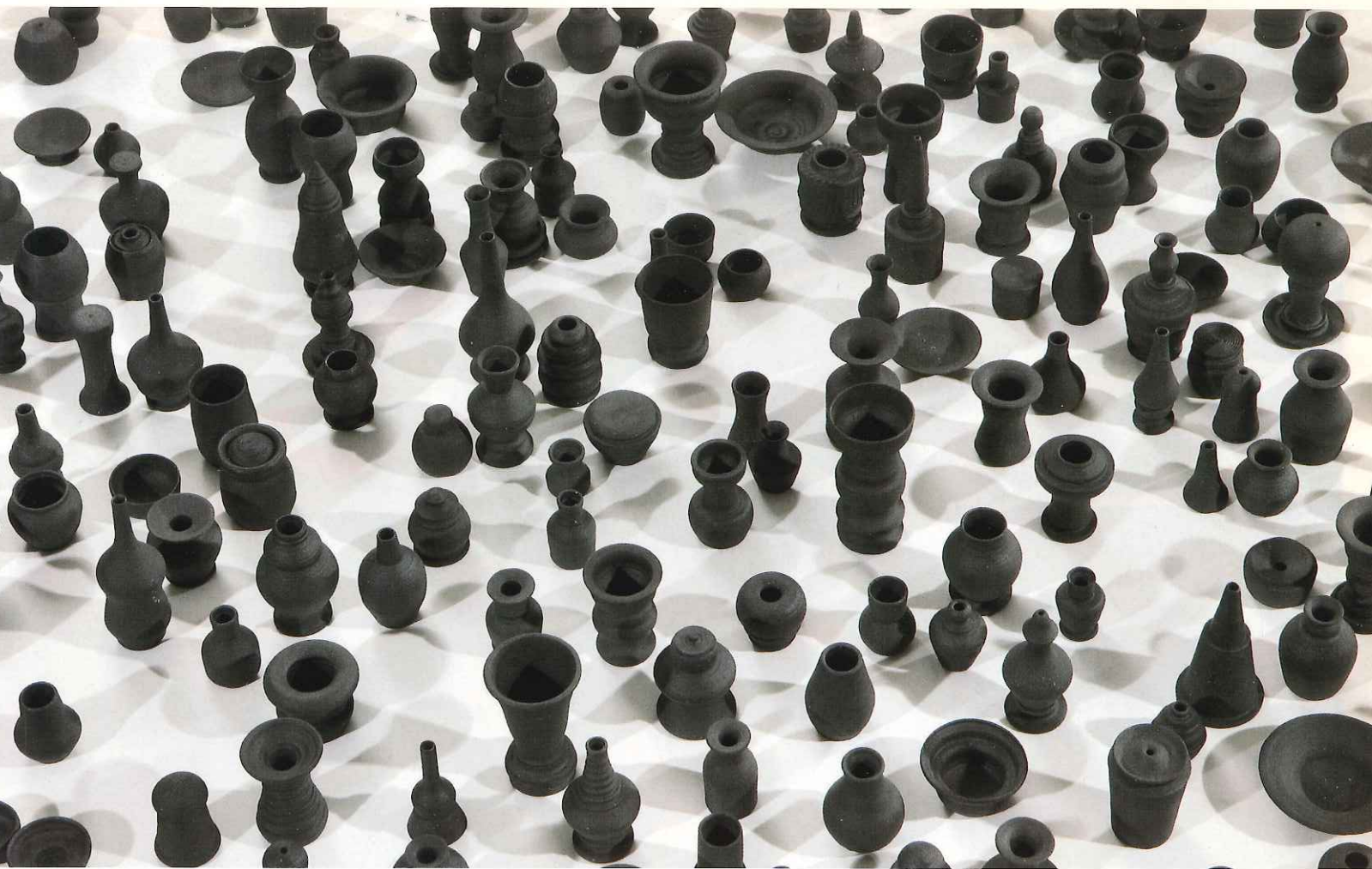
Left and right, overview and close-up of *Throwing Shadows*, 2008-10, black porcelain, dimensions variable. Photo Tom Powel. Courtesy Sperone Westwater.

Below, *Untitled*, 1999-2000, human bone, paper, 18 1/8 by 9 by 4 7/8 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Courtesy Sperone Westwater.

Incredibly, LeDray has also used his nimble fingers to shape thousands of ceramic vessels that never exceed 2 inches in height. Their earliest presentation came with *Milk and Honey* (1994-96), a tall wood-framed case that displays 2,000 thimble-size bowls, pots and vases on six glass shelves. While all the pottery is glazed a uniform white, no two forms are alike. LeDray upped the ante with *Oasis* (1996-2003), which marshals another 2,000 unique vessels in a similar glass case framed in brushed steel. Here the ceramics are painted with various bright colors and decorative designs. A recent variation titled *Throwing Shadows* (2008-10) premiered at the ICA, and comprises over 3,000 little pots that are glazed a matte charcoal gray. Arrayed under glass on three long tables, this ashen assembly suggests a collection of funerary urns. Each of these sculptures is an exhibition unto itself. Indeed, *Oasis* seems to catalogue the history of modern pottery, as it includes vessels in the style of George Ohr, Russel Wright and other notable ceramic artists and designers of the 20th century. Yet by choosing to present his pieces inside clean glass cases, LeDray also conjures the shop display and the marketplace. His uniquely crafted vessels refute the methods of mass production, while their tiny sizes speak to the diminished presence of the handmade in contemporary consumer culture.

A HIGHLIGHT OF THIS SHOW, and the source of its title, is *workworkworkworkwork*. This rarely seen sculpture debuted in the summer of 1991, when its 588 components were lined up on a sidewalk in New York's Astor Place. To roughly approximate this presentation indoors, the ICA arranged *workworkworkworkwork* on a long curblike platform that was painted gray. The sculpture's many miniature elements are clustered into 20 or so discrete groupings, each resembling a pile of used and discarded items that a financially strapped person might try to sell on a city street. Little coats and blankets are spread out to display even smaller objects, including shoes, jewelry and leather belts.





Dozens of diminutive books and magazines are covered with bits of found text and imagery that telescope the early 1990s. (George H.W. Bush, Michael Dukakis and a young Macaulay Culkin all make appearances.) Also of its time is the sculpture's repetitious title, which, while underscoring LeDray's laborious practice, spoke in 1991 to that period's economic malaise and weak job market, and the necessity of down-on-one's-luck resourcefulness.

Viewing *workworkworkworkwork* in 2010, one is reminded that our nation's economy is cyclical, unemployment is at a high, and various do-it-yourself enterprises are gaining traction. Perhaps attuned to these facts, LeDray recently revisited the down-market mood of his earlier sculpture in *MENS SUITS* (2006-09), a multipart tour de force that essentially scales down portions of a thrift shop by at least three quarters. Given its own large gallery at the ICA, this installation consists of three distinct but related tableaux, each demarcated by rectangles of linoleum tile and corresponding drop ceilings that suspend fluorescent lights about 4 feet above the mock floors. One of the three illuminated zones suggests the back room of a thrift shop, where secondhand garments have arrived in canvas bins and laundry bags to await their turn on an ironing board and eventual sorting on an abundant supply of hangers. The other two rectangles circumscribe display areas, where numerous suit jackets hang from circular racks, folded T-shirts are piled high on a long table and dozens of patterned ties are arranged into a tabletop mandala.

If a certain vulnerability is communicated by all of LeDray's shrunken objects, that impression is only amplified when those same small objects appear beat up, worn out and threadbare, as they do in *MENS SUITS*, *workworkworkworkwork* and elsewhere in LeDray's oeuvre. But despite all the abject elements in *MENS SUITS*—the scuffed floors, the cheap plastic hangers, the hopelessly dated and mismatched styles of clothing—one is nonetheless struck by the obvious efforts to organize this material, to arrange it with care, to display it with an artful eye. We might imagine that an army of dedicated volunteers is responsible for restoring a measure of dignity to this cast-off and empty apparel, but we know, of course, that LeDray has done all the work. ○

"Charles LeDray: *workworkworkworkwork*" debuted at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston [July 16-Oct. 17], where it was organized by associate curator Randi Hopkins. Following its presentation at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York [Nov. 18, 2010-Feb. 13, 2011], it travels to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston [May 15-Sept. 11, 2011].

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